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Book Review - Beyond Leadership: A Relational Approach to Organizational Theory in Education

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Introduction

So, picture this. A professor of educational leadership charged with preparing the next generation of school leaders is sitting in the principal's office. Specifically the writer is serving as a mentor to his former assistant principal and discussing the intersection of theory and practice facing this novice (let's call him Rob). The office is small but cozy. Rob's desk is piled with stacks of color coded folders and the walls are crammed with photos of family, students, and elementary artwork. With the door cracked I can hear the happy chaos that is an elementary school office. Kids and parents are coming and going. The intercom crackles and an outside door slams.

Rob smiles behind his desk and tells me that "Things are great!" despite the fact that I know that test scores are an issue and that the numbers of non-English speaking children enrolling at his school increases each week. "My biggest challenge is providing the support and feedback to beginning teachers to help them know their kids and know how to meet their needs."

While I mentally unpack that statement I am scrambling to respond with something profound and helpful. So, out pops one of my takeaways from a recent reading of Scott Eacott's *Beyond Leadership*, "It's all about relationships."

"Well, of course that's true," Rob replies. "If my teachers don't trust me and believe that I care then leading them is going to be impossible."

Now, this is a guy who looks up to me; a leader who values my opinion. Treading water mentally I desperately want to say something helpful and continue with another bon mot from Eacott, "Leadership is also situational. You have to tailor your leadership to your unique circumstances and situation."

“Well, that’s true too,” replies Rob. “I could probably change schools, but after three years I feel that I am just starting to understand my situation here and developing the relationships that I need to lead. Do you have any suggestions about how to do that better?”

I did have a politically correct, if palliative response for Rob, but if this one case story is true or generalizable, then practicing leaders need educational leadership theories that explain our world and situations, but also provide some framework or model to apply the theory in practice. Michael Fullan (2007) also asserts that relationships are important, but he provides a model (Framework for Leadership) for leaders to apply.

“Tell me what works,” is the refrain from many practitioners in the field. Rob is doubling the numbers of observations in classrooms, asking teachers to videotape and reflect on lessons and engaging teachers in dialogue about instruction. He is providing positive helpful feedback to these teachers and building trusting relationships anchored in celebrating improvement, not documenting failure. Rob, who is drawn to leadership, may be intuitively practicing Eacott’s relational approach unconsciously. There is a valid criticism of utilitarian leadership that emphasizes only test scores and management processes but practitioners are desperate to help kids and add tools that will assist them in this important work.

Dr. Scott Eacott, Professor of Educational Leadership at the University of South Wales, and author of *Beyond Leadership* makes a case for reframing the academic discussion of school leadership to focus on human relations. Secondly, Eacott is seeking to engage an international community of scholars from a range of disciplines in the collegial discussion. Eacott accomplishes both goals to some degree in this latest text, but as an instructor in higher education I wonder about the audience for *Beyond Leadership*, and whether the text would be a welcome addition to the educator preparation reading list.

Author & Publications

Scott Eacott is a relational theorist who blends disciplines in his writing about leadership. *Beyond Leadership* is a follow-up to Eacott's 2015 *Educational Leadership Relationally* and is a logical extension of his 2011 text, *School Leadership in Managerialist Times*. When Eacott writes that "the last generation of scholars...trained as educational researchers [were being] replaced by technicians or at best instrumental functionalists," (Eacott, 2011, xii) he has me on board. I do believe that preparation programs in higher education have reacted to political, fiscal, and policy pressures to place an undue pressure on educational leaders to demonstrate short-term results when my experience has shown me that sustained long-term, systemic change is a better approach.

Relational Theory

I certainly agree with Eacott that the starting point for a study of educational leadership should be leadership, not administration or management. Eacott argues for a theoretical approach that acknowledges the social world of teachers and principals and suggests that these relations be examined in context. Eacott proposes to re-conceptualize the strategic role of educational leaders as a social practice. Dr. Eacott articulates his "Framework" for the Relational Approach with five relational extensions, repeated several times in his writing and included here from his web page (<https://scotteacott.com/framework/>)

- The centrality of "organizing" in the social world creates an ontological complicity in researchers (and others) that makes it difficult to epistemologically break from ordinary language;
- Rigorous social scientific inquiry calls into question the very foundations of popular labels such as "the organization", "leadership", "management", and "administration";
- Contemporary spatio-temporal conditions cannot be separated from the ongoing, and inexhaustible, recasting of organizing activity;
- Foregrounding social relations enables the overcoming of the contemporary, and arguably enduring, analytical dualism of individualism/collectivism, universal/particular, and structure/agency; and

- In doing so, there is a productive – rather than merely critical – space to theorize organizing activity.

I do prefer the emphasis on leadership versus management in human relations. Relational leadership acknowledges the variability of time and place and the need of the leader as “auctor” to mold leadership to the situation. (Eacott, 2018). However, for me this has echoes of Hersey’s (2013) Situational Leadership, which posits that much of leadership is relational, and offers a model to diagnose relational actors’ readiness for change and a formula to direct a managed intervention. I do not find such a model in Eacott’s Framework.

Critique

I find *Beyond Leadership* to be too esoteric and “ivory tower” as a text for inclusion on the required reading list for aspiring educational leaders in higher education preparation programs. I believe that Eacott succeeds in his argument to present the relational approach to studying educational leadership, and I believe that he has succeeded in this text in his aim to further the international collegial conversation about his approach. Clearly he incited a lively debate on the merits of the relational approach with a variety of scholars from around the globe.

Eacott devotes half of *Beyond Leadership* to commentary from a variety of academics around the world on his theory, including authors from Canada, England, Israel, and the USA. Fenwick English, a “local” author from UNC-Chapel Hill is critical of Eacott’s dismissal of leadership studies as “non-scientific.” English states that “Eacott’s passionate advocacy for a relational approach...borders on missionary zeal.” (Eacott, 2018, p. 189).

It is my opinion that Eacott’s *Beyond Leadership* lacks examples from everyday practice to illustrate relational leadership. Examples would better explain the nature of relational leadership and explain better what it could look like. There is lots of philosophical noodling

about the nature of leadership, but less about the practical aspects of leading others and organizations.

One “Auctor’s” Perspective

I was a school principal and now I have the opportunity to train aspiring school leaders. Candidates in our licensure programs are trained in theory and practice and know how to use data for continuous improvement, conduct action research and plan strategically. However, these folks tell me that often they show up at school to find that their strategic plan has been derailed by a crisis, real or imagined, that demands leaders’ time and attention. They become firefighters and human relations is often about minimizing damage or sustaining the organization. Serious reflection, strategic planning and time spent building relationships is a luxury they do not have most days. What these practitioner/scholars want from higher education preparation programs is a blend of theory and practice that informs their everyday work leading others in schools. If Eacott’s audience is solely academics and thinkers in higher education, then he has met expectations to provide a scholarly treatise on the relational nature of leadership. I do not predict that *Beyond Leadership* will be a bestseller snapped up at airport booksellers. Aspiring educational leaders in university preparation programs could be a potential audience (it is interesting to see the chapters that have been downloaded in the on-line edition) but if so, then I believe that *Beyond Leadership* could be improved with examples illustrating the relational leadership model from practice.

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